

A Huntress Born

Remember, this is a dream, this is only a dream...

I'm 16, the eldest daughter in a family along with a Mom, a Dad, and a (Irritating Little) Brother. I knew immediately that I was dreaming as my dream-life was so different from reality, that it *had* to be a dream. My dream-father was black-hispanic, my dream-mother was dark-haired and white. That alone told me that I was dreaming. My dream-brother was another give-away, as I don't have a brother in real life. Not once during the dream were any names mentioned. In this retelling, I use relational names to clarify who is doing what to whom. But somehow I knew, even during the dream, names really didn't matter.

It is late afternoon. The sunlight is playing through the trees as Dad, Bro, and I are setting up various things inside the two-story house as part of a planned series of practical jokes on Mom. There was a bucket filled with confetti teetering on the not-quite closed door from the garage into the house. Bro had replaced the dish detergent bottle with a bottle filled with olive oil. Dad is showing me how to repack the can of worms when the phone rings.

I was closest to the phone so I went ahead and answered it. As I picked up the beige handset, Dad aimed the can at me and released the worms. I stifled a giggle, but I was still smiling as I said, "Hello?"

I didn't recognize the voice. It was a low raspy whisper that came through the handset strangely clear and understandable. "They are coming. Tonight. Prepare yourselves." **click** My smile went away. I looked to the lazy sun in the sky as Dad realized that something was wrong and snatched the phone from my hand.

But all Dad heard was a dial tone.

He looked at me as he hung up the phone. My face paling, I wanted to give in to the panic that was trying to well up within me. Instead, I swallowed. Took a deep breath. And told Dad what the voice on the phone said.

He closed his eyes and set his jaw. I knew he was pissed. But I didn't know how worried he was. "Who was it?"

"I don't know. I've never heard a voice like that before."

"A voice like... what?" I could see his forehead furrowing. As if he was trying to hear the sound straight from my memory.

"A voice that reminded me of a cold wind blowing through winter branches." I had never heard the voice of a vampire before. Not even in a recording. But I knew... somehow I knew... exactly *what* had been on the phone. And that knowledge filled me with a terrible fear that made me afraid even to tell my own father. I caught myself wringing my hands and forced myself to stop.

Dad opens his eyes and looks at me. Studies me. Watching him as he watched me, I could see in his flashing eyes how seriously his mind was considering my words.

Quietly with firmness, Dad finally speaks. "The sun sets in a few hours. We don't have much time to prepare. And no one is close enough to help us tonight. We're on our own until daybreak."

Dad starts for the hall closet. Yelling over his shoulder, he tells me to dial a certain speed-dial code on the phone. Let it ring twice and then hang up. After I shout that I had hung up, he calls me and Bro to the dining room table.

There is a large black duffel bag sitting there. Dad had pushed all the china that was on the table to the end, and some of the plates had fallen off the table and crunched under Bro's feet. Dad had bought that set just for Mom, and she treasures the gift. The twisting feeling in my stomach turned in on itself when I considered how bad things had to be for Dad to toss the plates aside with such careless abandon.

The first thing he pulls out is a bottle of clear gel. He gives the bottle to Bro and tells him to squirt the gel on every window sill and door frame. If he thinks that a person will put a hand on that spot to climb through a window or force a door open, then gel it. Bro grabs the bottle and starts in the kitchen. Then Dad pulls out a bag of balloons and a jar with silvery dust in it. He tells me to pour some dust in a balloon, carefully blow the balloon up and tie it off. Stuff four balloons inside the chimney, and shake the silvery dust all over everything.

"Mom is not going to like this." I make a futile attempt to return a sense of normalcy to the situation. But, as soon as I said it, I knew that nothing would ever be normal again.

"It's silver dust. And it's blessed. And Mom will just have to deal with it. If we survive tonight, we'll clean it up together." Dad flashes a quick smile. Suddenly, I can't bear to look at his face. I take the jar and the balloons, and start for the fireplace.

I can see where Bro has gooped the doors and windows. I tell him to goop the doors inside the house as well. He and I have finished with the downstairs rooms and were starting upstairs when Dad calls us back to the dining room again.

On the table was the nearly empty, flattened bag, and an array of weapons. Where did Dad hide all these weapons? Did Mom know about them? She hates it when he leaves weapons where Bro and I can see them. I suddenly recall that Mom was quite the pacifist, and that she didn't like that Dad has taught me and Bro how to defend ourselves. She felt that as a society, we should advance past the need for such personal defense.

"Here, since you play DOOM, you know what to do with these." Dad hands Bro a dart gun and a bag of darts. The darts have the same sheen as the silver dust. I know, merely by looking at the darts, that they have a needle of blessed silver, and that they are filled with holy water. I also understand that the gel that Bro had been squirting on everything was also made with holy water. As I think on the seriousness of the weapons, I find myself wishing that Dad had given Bro a muzzle instead. "Oh wow! These are so cool! I can't wait to blow up vampires with them!" *Are little brothers really that irritating in real life?*

"Here, since you like Lara Croft, I'm sure that you can put these to use." I start to argue that I don't like the character's physique, but I shut up when I see that Dad has just given me a bag of grenades. They were made not to hurt living, breathing humans, but to hurt undead vampires. These grenades were filled with holy water gel that was sure to blanket a 10-foot diameter circle, and randomly splatter more gel even further.

"I had been hoping to give these to you for your birthday. You have trained very hard to use these properly, and I'm sure that you might want them for tonight." He is holding out a pair of cat-claws. The enhanced gloves slip over my hands and I note that they were custom made to fit me. The retractable blades were made from more blessed silver, and the spongy pads on the palm had been soaked in a clear gel. *More holy water*, I thought to myself.

I glance out the window. The sunlight no longer graced the curtains, and the sky was an intense red. It was almost sunset and we didn't know where Mom was. She had not spoken to us since this morning when she had announced that she was meeting some of her friends for a "ladies get-together". She had tried to talk me into going, but I don't like her friends. Dad had impressed on her, his need for her to call him if they were separated before sunset. A directive that she usually complied with. I look back at Dad. His face reflects my concern as the three of us work feverishly to finish trapping the house. I'm worried. I'm very worried. Although any chemical trap that is set off will not hurt a living person, there are still some traps with sharply pointed objects that could turn a living person into a dead person with severe quickness.

The three of us stand at the intersection in the hallway. Our backs are to each other as we each face a different direction, and we each have a weapon at the ready. Bro has the dart gun in his right hand and a ready dart in his left while he is facing the living room and den. I have a grenade in my left hand with the pin removed, the claws on my right cat-claw are extended and ready to swing in the direction of the kitchen and dining-room. Dad holds up a silver sword and a gleaming dagger, ready to defend against whatever tries to breach the front door.

"Oh no!" Dad's voice startles both Bro and myself as he runs upstairs. Taking the steps two at a time, he yells over his shoulder for me and Bro to stay together.

The quiet in the house is almost unbearable. The heaviness of my beating heart is threatening to drop into my lungs. I'm straining to hear the slightest sound, the muffled step of an intruder. I look out the dining room window, towards the west. The last weak gleams of light are disappearing from the western trees. The sun sets. Windows shatter with loud crashes as first the shadows, then the people that made the shadows, jump through the windows into the house.

The assault had begun.

The first wave of vampires that entered the house were quickly destroyed. Either choking on the silver dust that was on the curtains, or being picked off by Bro as they came into the hallway. But the vampires kept coming. And with my weapons, I had to fight them in close quarters. I didn't throw many grenades, maybe three at the most. The gel was soon everywhere and it proved to be almost too slippery for me to stand in. I stopped counting the vampires after I had killed my fifth one for the night. No longer able to hold our position in the hallway, Bro and I made our way to the living room, where Bro could use his size and the cover of furniture to his advantage and I had more room to swing the blades of my cat-claws.

I never felt more alive. Even though I was fighting for my life, fighting for the lives of my family, I was enjoying myself. I had no fear. I had even forgotten that I was dreaming. I was living in the moment. It wasn't like I was hurting real people. These were the undead, these were vampires, these were vermin to be exterminated before they destroy us.

Because of my bitch-fu lethality, most of the vampires had forgotten about Bro. They turned their back to him as they tried to overwhelm me, allowing Bro to dart them in the ass. Yes, Bro was *aiming* for the ass. And he giggled as he did so. For once I didn't mind his sniping as it made my opponents drop their guard, making it easy for me to either rip out their throats or drive the blades into an unguarded heart.

But, where is Dad? I haven't heard him yell since he ran upstairs. I can't even hear any noises from upstairs as the din of the fighting in the living room was drowning out almost everything else. I start to yell at Bro that we need to find Dad, when Mom runs in from the hall, screaming. Her light yellow capris and matching pink and yellow blouse seems to burst out from all the blood and gore splattered on the walls and furniture. My first thought was that she was running from the vampires and screaming from fright. After all, she can't defend herself. She didn't even want to learn when Dad offered to teach her. I guess that make her the obligatory non-combatant in the family. I start to yell at her to get with Bro and get down, but before I can say anything, she takes one look at the carnage and runs screaming upstairs. There is something odd

about her reaction but I can't put my finger on it at the time. While I'm glad to see her, I secretly wished that Dad or myself had been able to check her.

Dad screams something unintelligible from upstairs. Merely from the sound, I know he's in trouble. Bro and I both hear him but we are still fighting the undead on the first floor. Finally, I kill the last known vampire in the living room. Bro and I again stand with our backs to each other. We stay there for a few minutes, waiting to see if any more vampires are going to come inside after us.

A cool, night breeze is blowing through the house. The wind chills my face where the holy water gel was smeared across it. Those few curtains that are still mounted on the wall wave at me, as if telling me that it is time to move on. The bottom floor cleaned of undead, Bro and I gather up what ammunition we have left and start to make our way upstairs.

There are more gooey remains of vampires on the stairs and on the second floor landing. (In this dream, vampires don't insta-cremate into ash when they die. Instead, decomposition catches up with them at an advanced rate, and their bodies shudder into goo as the cellular structures just fall apart. Eww.) As I start to emerge onto the second floor, I hear Mom's voice and Dad's voice, but not clear enough to make out words. Something isn't right about the tone of their conversation. But I still can't understand the words. I wonder, how after all that has just happened, could Mom be making seductive sounds. Shouldn't she be whimpering in fear? Shouldn't she be upset that I was wearing blades, that Bro had a gun, that Dad had a sword? What the hell would make Mom offer a night of wild sex to Dad after all that has just happened? Shouldn't Mom be screaming about her children being attacked in her house? Is she in shock? Is that why she is acting like the carnage has made her horny? Like she is being turned on by the sight of blood...

The truth strikes me and steals away my breath. A chill races through me, weakening my legs as I realize that Mom had to have been taken by a vampire before she came back inside. The attack that Bro and I just fought off was *not* the assault that we were warned about, it was a diversion. So no one would notice that Mom was acting funny. So we would turn our back to the very thing we wanted to destroy.

As I lean against the wall of the staircase, stunned by these thoughts, Bro hears her and starts to run from behind me, heading into the bedroom. I grab him before he can emerge onto the landing. Putting my finger to my lips, I motion him to be quiet. He wants to complain, but just nods instead. I lead him into the hall bathroom. On the other side of the bathroom wall is the master bedroom.

Quietly, I motion him to the far wall of the bathroom. I keep the lights off, and start to close the door. I think about it for a brief moment, and don't close the door completely, but leave a crack of light from the hall remaining. I shuffle beside him, we put our ears on the wall, and listen.

"Don't worry about the children, sweetie... once they join us, the four of us will be a happy family again." That was Mom, talking in sickingly saccharine tones. In the dream, I suddenly remember that she wasn't happy with Dad teaching me and Bro how to use weapons and defend ourselves. She also wasn't happy about his involvement in some kind of underground organization. She had been hoping that he would settle down with her, and leave that shadow brotherhood. She kept telling me and Bro that Dad's ways were not how civilized people lived.

"You're not my wife anymore. And I won't let you turn the kids." That was Dad, sounding very tired and weak. I didn't have to see him to know that Mom had bitten him, had turned him into a vampire. Bro looked at me, and started silently weeping. He and I both understood what we had to do. We had to kill our parents.

“I’m not going to bring the children back into our family. All I have to do is hold you away from them. Keep you from corrupting them any further. My friends are going to have a talk with the children.” *Friends?* My thoughts was swirling around that word. All of Mom’s friends were social climbers that had cute little doggies. Her friends were hanging on every word from Martha Stewart’s mouth. Certainly not people that would be associating with the undead.

Dad was saying something, but another sound caught my attention. A sound that came from the direction of the cracked door. There was someone else in the house. And that someone was coming up the stairs.

I motioned to Bro to stay down and be quiet. He nodded and brought his dart gun to the ready. I extended the claws from my hand and crept to the bathroom door. Careful not to move the door, careful not to be seen, careful not to be caught in the door’s sweep should it be suddenly moved, I peeked through the thin opening.

Vampires. Two of them. Not the rent-a-thugs that Bro and I had so easily destroyed earlier. Those vampires were very young in their undeath. Their immaturity meant that they had to rely on mere physical strength to overpower you. These two were older in their undeath. These two were stronger physically. These two had psionic abilities that could mess with your mind and mentally overpower you. It’s a good thing that Dad had me and Bro take lessons from his friends in how to fend off and deflect psychic attacks. Even as they was coming up the stairs, I could feel the vampires looking for us with their minds, probing for our location, our weaknesses. But Bro and I both fooled them, by making a mental imagery of being mice, the vampires thought we were only rodents looking for a late night snack.

The vampires never stopped at the bathroom. They went straight into the master bedroom.

“Where are they? Where are the children?” The vampire’s voice was raspy. While it wasn’t the same voice that called the warning, it too reminded me of a cold wind blowing through winter branches.

“I last saw them downstairs. They were playing with the playmates you sent over. They were having lots of fun, but they made an awful mess of the living room. But once we are all family again, things will be better.” Mom sounded so cheerful, that it made me sick to the stomach. I knew then that not only had they turned her, but they had messed with her mind so that she thought the vampires that had been trying to kill us were other children. It was very hard not to let my hate consume me, and give away my position. Instead, I let my hate power my resolve to survive.

The other vampire’s voice was a little higher in tone, but still raspy. “She knows nothing but what you have told her. But *him*, he will tell us *everything*.” The other vampire was excited, I could tell that he had a plan in mind for Dad.

“No! Not Dad!” Bro loudly whispered his objection, and in doing so, he dropped his mental guard for a moment. Just loud enough for me to want to smack him. Just long enough for the elder vampires to know where we were. Cornered in the bathroom with only one way out. *Shit*.

The driving psionic assault began immediately. Pounding waves of weakness and submission, alternating with the vampires willing futility and despair into my mind. Already on my knees, I leaned on the bathroom wall to stay upright, my eyes closed in an effort to concentrate and fend off the assault. I heard my brother drop to the ground and cry out as he grabbed his head. Opening my eyes to see where he was, I put my foot on his neck to keep him to the ground, and picked up his loaded dart gun. If they succeeded in controlling his mind, I didn’t want to have to kill him to save myself. The psionic assault was strong, I will admit that. But these elder vampires were male. They have never dealt with the pain and anguish that comes with having a period, with having PMS. They were strong, but my pain tolerance was stronger.

I give a mental imagery of me succumbing to the pain. I knew that I couldn't face them in the hallway. I would be quickly overpowered by the stronger elders. But, if they come into the bathroom to get us, they can only come in one at a time. Still keeping the mental image of my "weakness" fresh in my mind. I raise the dart gun and wait. Another part of me suddenly remembers a poem I had once heard. *Step into my parlor...*

The door opens as the vampire psionically targets where he thinks I should be. He steps in but doesn't turn on the light. I'm sure that his eyes are closed, as he is relying on his psionic abilities to find me. I can see the outline of his body, the light reflecting off his neck. The small flakes of grey skin reflecting with a waxy sheen. A whiff of air, a swirl caused by his movement, and I smell the distinct scent of decomposing blood, and with it, a faint scent of Mom's perfume. I look up into his face, and realize that this is the bastard that took my mother. This is the bastard that brought her into undeath. He sees my movement as one of submittal. He reaches for me, opening his mouth and baring his fangs, and his teeth, and even the back of his throat. I wait until I hear the threatening hiss...

I fire a holy water dart into his open mouth. The wet smack as the dart hits the back of his throat is such a pleasant, reassuring sound, I can't help but smile at it. He closes his mouth out of reflex and drives the dart into his flesh even further. Just like how some snake venom isn't deadly unless injected, holy water doesn't kill vampires unless delivered into the bloodstream. Otherwise, it only burns the skin and causes an allergic reaction in the vampire. The vampire I had just shot was now having a bad case of the hives. His neck began to bulge and his swollen face prevented him from opening his mouth. Taking a step backwards into the bathroom sink, he started ripping and clawing at his own neck, in a mad attempt to pull the dart away from the flesh. I enjoyed watching him suffer for a bit, then fired another dart into his neck, right into the now-exposed artery. As soon as I knew the dart had hit true, I pulled the shower curtain off the rod and covered me and my brother with a plastic sheet of pink roses.

The curtain had barely begun to settle down around us when his head exploded with a wet *whump*. Red and pink and yellow goo splattered the shower curtain, and the pink and white walls, and the wall length mirror, and the smoothly painted ceiling, and the pink towel (for Mom) and the red towel (for Dad), and the pink and yellow toilet seat covers, and there was stinky red and pink and yellow goo everywhere. My first thought was that Mom was going to be so mad at me for trashing her perfectly arranged bathroom. I remembered how mean Mom was to Dad for a while when he dared to opine that her decoration choices were... prissy. I smiled for a second, then the truth about what happened to Mom rushed to the surface and I gave in to my tears and started to cry.

But no tears came. Instead I drop to the floor, unable to move. I had forgotten about the other vampire. He must be old enough to be strategic, as he waited until he sensed my weakness. Then he overpowered me while I was distracted. My brother was completely unconscious. Not from my foot on his neck, which I had removed when shielding us with the shower curtain, but from the elder vampire's assault. I could feel the sickly psionic tendrils trying to probe my mind, trying to twist my thinking. He had my body, but like hell was he going to have all of me! I used the truth about Mom to fuel my resolve, to keep my last psionic defenses up.

I heard him cursing in the master bedroom. Then a sharp slap, and something heavy hitting the wall. "What kind of children do you have? You son of a bitch! Your son retreats into himself and your daughter defies me still!" The elder vampire was livid. He was very angry and he was directing his anger at Dad. I was curious about why the elder vampire didn't come after me in the bathroom. He had me paralyzed with his psionics, why didn't he come to finish us off? Unless he wasn't absolutely sure that I *was* paralyzed.

Dad's laughter, while vocally weak, was strong with resolve... and pride. "I'm proud of my children, yes I am. They are not the easy prey you thought they would be." Dad starts to mock the elder vampire. As he does so, I realize that I can

control my breathing again. I understand what Dad is doing. He is forcing the elder vampire to focus on him, giving me a chance to get myself back together.

Another sharp smack, and then two more. “You won’t be laughing when I make them my slaves. I thought I was going to kill you. But now, I’m going to let you live. Let the hunger torment you, and let you feed off your wife.” Again a sharp smack, but this one was accompanied by a thick *snap*. The same sound that a breaking bone makes. I realize that this elder vampire is a cruel bastard. Forcing a vampire to feed off another vampire only intensifies the blood-lust. Drives what little sanity that is left completely away. I have to do something. I certainly can’t just lay here and wait for undeath to finally take me.

A quiet attempt and I realize that I can move. Dad’s taunting has diverted enough of vampire’s attention so I could regain full control of myself. Bro is still unconscious, but I’m able to move freely again. As I pick up the weapons, I fill my mind with an emotional imagery of the despair that came with the paralysis, and with the visual imagery of the bathroom, and start to creep out into the hall. I can’t wait for the elder vampire to come after me. I need to end this now.

Crouched low in the hall, just outside the bedroom door. I have the dart gun in one hand, the other is clawed. I want to throw a holy-water grenade into the room, but I don’t want to hurt Dad. If Dad is still human, then the grenade won’t hurt him. But if he *has* been infected... He still sounds like my Dad, and I don’t want to hurt him as long as he is still Dad. I can’t bring myself to throw the grenade.

“You’d better kill us. Otherwise, you’ve just extended the hunting season. As long as we are able to move, we will seek to destroy you and your kind. Even if you manage to turn my children, they will seek your destruction. Just as I will.” Dad’s voice sounded wet and slurry. I wondered if his jaw was broken.

“Even though your own weapons will be too painful to handle? How do you wield that which will kill you?” The vampire mocked Dad as he moved closer to the door. Did he know I was there?

“The flesh burns for a little while, and then it is over. After my soul is released from this corrupted flesh, I will be free. Your soul, however, will only descend into the hell that is waiting for you.” I’ve never heard Dad sound so confident. And yet, I closed my eyes as I realized the importance of what he said. *This corrupted flesh...*

I opened my eyes and saw the world with a new sight. I knew what I had to do.

Looking into the corner of the room, I could see the vampire’s leg moving towards the door. A moment more of indecision and I will lose the advantage of surprise and the physical battle that would follow. But by then, I had already made up my mind. The two holy water grenades were almost to the moment of bursting when I threw them into the room. The vampire tried to run out of the room, but I tripped him as he entered the hall. A wet sounding blast, and the high-pitched screams of my mother as the holy water gel burned her drowned out everything else.

The elder vampire, realizing that I was truly free of his control, psionically assaulted my mind again. But I couldn’t hear him. Even though I was mere feet away, I was untouched by his power. My mother’s screams kept echoing in my mind. The reality of why the gel was burning her laid hard on my soul, and pressed out an unshakable fury that became an impenetrable wall that the vampire’s assault could not get through.

Another wet blast, the gel slapped me on my back. I was standing in the doorway now, firing the dart gun into the vampire as he twitched and jerked on the floor. I kept reloading and firing the dart gun until I couldn’t quickly grab more darts. The bag was nearly empty. In the same motion as throwing the dart gun to the side, I locked the claws of my gloves to

the extended position and began ripping away at the now prone vampire. He was trying to scream, both physically and psionically, but I couldn't hear him. All I could hear was my mother's whimpering and sobbing. She was pleading with my father to help her get the putrid gel off of her skin, help her make the burning in her blood stop. Asking him why did I do such a thing to her, when all she wanted was for us to be a family again. All she wanted was for me to be a popular teenage girl, and for Bro to be a baseball player, and for Dad to just settle down and be her husband. All she wanted... was us to be a family.

Instead, she gets a house full of vampires, her precious china crushed, her delicately arranged bathroom rent. And an eternal darkness.

The night's events had fully descended on my consciousness, and the thought of what I still had left to do filled me with a fierce anger that I have never felt before. I took it out on the vampire below me. I wanted him to see exactly what this "prey" was capable of. I wanted him to know that a mere child had defeated him. Using the claws, I ripped open his chest, snapping ribs and throwing aside yellow decaying lungs. Grinning, I ripped out his heart with gleeful abandon. Holding it, still beating, in front of his face, I had the satisfaction of seeing the shock in his eyes as he realized that I had beaten him. Then his eyes glazed over and he died. His body melted into decomposing ichor, and his stilled heart dripped out of my hand.

Oh, how I gloated over his final death.

"Look out!" Dad's voice shocking me back to the present. And the realization that I had turned my back on two more vampires.

I turn as I stand, with my claws still extended, and run into the shadow of movement that is rushing at me. Instinct and training takes over my intentions and my clawed hand slips between ribs and slices close to my mother's heart. She is reaching to embrace me, not for a motherly hug, but for a vampiric bite. One hand on my head, grabbing my hair, the other hand on my back, to keep me from pulling away. And my hand deep in her chest, the exposed flesh burning from the holy-water soaked pads on my cat's claws. The force of my thrust had pushed her torso away from me, kept my neck away from those newly gleaming fangs.

We stand there for a moment in that deadly embrace. We both start to silently cry. My tears of salted water, her tears of watered blood. Grimacing from the pain inflicted by my weapon, she tries to pull away, but I close my hand around her rib.

"I love you, Mom. I'm sorry, but I have to do this." With my free hand, I reach into the pouch of darts. I still have one left.

"They promised me that we would be a family again. That you wouldn't use weapons again. That things would be normal." At last, Mom sounds like herself. The control the elder vampires had over her died with them.

"They lied to you, Mom." Grabbing the dart tightly, I think of how to thrust the dart so that her end will be a quick one.

"I know... now." She is resigned to her fate. Letting go of my hair and back, she drops her arms. She knows that I'm going to kill her, and she is going to let me do it.

I raise my left hand, holding the dart. Do I have to do this? I don't want to do this. I have to stop seeing her as Mom, and see her as just another vampire. I reach back, and begin my swing into her chest.

Dad suddenly stands behind her, the bite on his neck ugly, bloody, and blackened. *Oh shit.* I forgot about Dad. He moves quicker than I can see, catches my hand in mid-swing, and the dart that was in my hand is now in his.

“Don’t you hurt your mother like this.” He crushes the dart in his hand. The holy water smokes in his palm for a moment, and then no more.

In shock at the swiftness of Dad’s turning, I release my grip on Mom and fall backwards, slipping on the vampiric goo on the floor. Completely consumed by fright, I open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out. I can’t turn away from Dad, so I crawl backwards until my retreat is stopped by the bedroom wall.

He embraces her tightly. He holds her like nothing has happened. Like he has just come home from a long day at work and is relieved to see his precious wife again. “Shh. Everything is going to be okay now. We’ll be a family again, I promise.” He speaks so softly to her. But even then, I can hear the raspiness creeping into his voice. A cold wind blew from the sound in his voice, across my soul, and even my tears fled from the creeping winter.

“No more fighting?” She was crying again. “No, no more.” He stroked her hair and as he did, it fell from her burnt scalp in clumps.

“No more weapons?” Now her voice was also developing that coarse raspiness to it. “No, no more weapons, no more training, no more of my friends from the center coming over and ruining our day.” He buried his face in her neck, and suddenly sharply turned away from her skin. I could see his face, and as he grimaced from pain, I watched the newly developed fangs burst through his gums.

“And the children will be alright?” She sounded so much like my mother. But she wasn’t my mother anymore. I can’t keep thinking of her as my mother. Or she’ll kill me. “Yes, the children will be alright. They will grow up just fine.” He sighed, furrowed his face as he made a hard decision.

My mind returning to the present, I fumble in the pouch of darts and silently cry as I find it empty. I still have my cat-claws on. I’m sure that I can destroy what was my mother quickly. But my father... Dad... he still has his training, and now he has the strength of a hungry vampire. I consider killing myself, ripping out my own throat before I can be turned as well.

He had turned her around for the embrace so that she was facing away from me. I suddenly feel horribly cold, and realize that a vampire was looking at me. I look up, and saw that Dad was looking directly at me. His next words echoed loud in my ears that night. I am sure that they will echo in my mind for the rest of my life. “Your daughter will grow up to be a powerful woman, and your son will grow up to be a strong man.” He was crying tears of mixed salt and blood. He motioned to something off to my left.

Careless and curious, I looked to my left. And saw that behind the door, laying on the ground, was a sword. There was a hole in the wall where the sword was thrown against it. Dad’s sword. A silver sword. The *family* sword. Handed down from elder to younger, forged in a time countless generations ago. The sword that marked my family as being hunters of the undead. I had practiced and trained with a mock sword from the time that I was able to lift one. Recently I had even practiced and trained with a real, and sharpened, sword. But I had never been allowed to even so much as touch *the* family sword. Dad always said that until I proved myself worthy, I couldn’t even so much as breathe upon it. He never played around with it, and always treated it with holy respect.

I looked back at him, he just nodded. He held Mom tightly, and said so calmly, “Truly, our children are worthy.” I understood what he meant. He shifted his stance, planting his feet firmly. I picked up the sword, and quietly moved into

position. He had positioned Mom, so that if I ran her through the heart, I would run through his heart as well. To keep from crying again as I studied their positions with a strange detachment. I then noticed that the sword, although mostly silver, was also incredibly light. Dad had said that this sword chooses its wielder. I guess the sword agreed with Dad, and was now choosing me.

“Honey, I’m really hungry. Do you think the children would bring us something to... nibble on? Do you?” Mom’s voice was changing even further away from the Mom that I knew. She was starting to sound feral.

“One more hug, sweetheart, and then we’ll find out.” The look in his face was urgent. I knew that he too was feeling the blood-lust, the *hunger*.

I prayed a silent prayer of mercy and swiftness, then charged at my parents. Their flesh hissed as the sword pierced through them with shocking speed. Mom started screaming again, Dad just set his jaw from the pain, and I held on to the hilt, trying to ignore the sounds. Mom tried to get away, but Dad just held her tighter, and I closed my eyes to the sight of her body burning from the inside out. The screaming turned into a gurgle, and then died away completely as Mom’s body decomposed into goo.

When Mom died, I opened my eyes and looked down. The pile of goo inside of her clothes continued to spread out around my feet. And around Dad’s feet. Dad was still there. I look up, afraid to do so, but I look at him anyway. The sword had pierced his chest. Blood was flooding into, and out of, his lung. I looked into his eyes, and he smiled.

“You need to develop your upper body strength some more, darling.” As Dad spoke, smoking blood dripped from his mouth. “Now, finish what you have started.”

I nodded, silently crying as I did so, and pushed on the hilt, driving the sword completely through him. I never let go, and wound up standing next to him, face to face. His face grimaced and I was fascinated by the sight of his vampiric fangs. He noticed my curiosity.

“Darling, promise me you’ll never get this close to a vampire again.” He sighed, and smiled. He knows that I’m always curious about things. Always wanting to learn more about something new.

“I promise, Daddy.” I smiled in return. But I really wanted to laugh. He did have a point. I was in a very dangerous spot.

“Good girl.” His chest began to dissolve. Red and yellow goo began to pour from the wound. It ran down his body and mixed with Mom’s clothes. “Where’s your brother?” He still sounded himself, he sounded genuinely concerned.

“In the bathroom, they got to his mind and he shut down to protect himself.” I made another mistake. I gave away the position of a fellow hunter. Dad didn’t say anything, but the chastising look on his face stung more than any words he could say.

“Call the center, have you and him checked out. I’m proud of you.” His face was decomposing as I watched. But his eyes... his eyes never glazed over or had a deathly look to them. Even as his body gave in to true death, his eyes still shone with the love he had for his family. And with the pride of seeing his daughter become a true Huntress, chosen by the Sword.

He closed his eyes. As his head bent forward, his body shimmered and splashed against my feet. I stood there, holding the sword in the same position as before his death, straight forward. I note that the sword had not a nick, a scratch, or even a discoloration. I look past the sword to the two piles of clothes at my feet. The remains of my parents soaking them

thoroughly. And then even that started to smoke as through the broken window on the east side of the room, the first rays of the morning sun caressed me.

My brother stumbled into the room, screaming for me. “Sis! SIS!” He looked around, like he was looking for someone, and started crying when he realized that there was no one here but me. He rushed to embrace me, but since he was in a shadow, I instinctively held up the sword to defend myself.

He stopped very quickly, barely able to keep from slipping on the gel and the goo. “Sis! It’s me!” He screamed in shock. He kept glancing from the business end of the sword to my face. But he never stepped out of the shadow.

“Yea, so what. Step into the sun.” My voice was strangely calm. As calm as Dad’s was before he died. I had no more fear. Even if Bro had been turned, I still would not have been afraid. I was a Huntress now.

Bro realized I was serious. Saying nothing, he stepped into the sunlight that was now flooding the room, and turned first his face, and then all of him in the light. When he turned back to face me, he was crying. I rushed to him, lowering the sword, and embraced him, and we both fell to our knees, sobbing in the morning light, kneeling on pink and yellow cloth.

* three days later *

It is a beautiful warm day at the place that Bro and I have nicknamed, “The Center”. It is really a set of large homes in the back woods. We are far removed from what most people call “civilization”, but here we still have TV and Internet access. We have hidden generators and bunkers underground, and the compound is surrounded by a set of fences. Some fences to keep out the living. Some fences to keep out the dead. The government knows about the Center, but stays away from it. The government knows that what is done by the people of the Center, needs to be kept hidden from the public. As far as the government is concerned, the Center, the organization that runs it, and most of the people here... don’t exist.

It is late summer, and the trees are thick with leaves. A close friend of Dad, a man that I only knew as “the Director”, is walking with me in the afternoon. I had always kept a respectable distance from him before, as Mom was concerned about “old men wanting to hang around young girls”, but now the Director was like an uncle to me. He had never been improper to me, and went to great lengths to help me and Bro adjust to living at the Center.

When the Director showed up at the house, shortly after sunrise, he was the one who found me and Bro in our parent’s room. I don’t remember, but he said that both Bro and I stayed awake long enough to tell him that our parents were dead. Afterward, when I had written an account of what happened that night, the Director, along with two female witnesses, went over the account with me to make sure that he understood what happened. After the Center’s Psi-Corp cleared me and Bro medically, he insisted that we stay at the Center until all loose ends were taken care of.

Which is what we were talking about that late summer day. “Don’t worry about the police. We have that matter already taken care of. The formal investigation will close with your parents as being kidnapped that night and two bodies that resemble them will be found later. This way, you’ll be able to get your inheritance quickly.” The Director spoke quickly and with precision. I could tell that this discussion was disturbing him. I was too young a Huntress to have to discuss the finer points of how to fool coroners. And he didn’t want to admit how the loss of his friend was affecting him as well. But it was very clear to me. I saw things now with a completely different light than before.

To spare him from having to continue speaking about the now-settled matter, I changed the subject to one that he was more willing to speak about.

"I worry about Brother, he fell to the mental assault so quickly." I realized that I was speaking of my brother, not as a little brother, but as a mother would about her children. Four years separated me and Bro. But I didn't feel 16 anymore. I felt older, much older.

The Director picked up on that change as well. "Your brother is very young. Going within himself like he did was the best thing he could do. We'll keep an eye on him, to make sure that his mind is strong. But I worry about you. You had to kill your parents." He eyes me closely. The Psi-Corp had quickly cleared Bro, saying that he had managed to prevent the elder vampires from warping his mind. And that any mischief Bro might get into was the inevitable outcome of being a 12-year-old boy. The Psi-Corp wasn't so eager to clear me as quickly. They didn't understand how I was able to fend off the elder vampire's direct psionic attack. And the fact that I haven't cried anymore since the Director found us was bothering everyone.

I don't say anything for a long while. We continue walking. I notice how I'm able to see so much at once. The light playing through the leaves of the trees. The intensity of it when we step out from under a tree. The pervasiveness of the sunlight when we step back in shade. When I close my eyes, I can *sense* life all around me. I can smell it, and taste it, and hear it, and see it, and feel it. I stop walking, and the weight of the concealed Sword lies cool against my skin. Its presence gives me strength. I don't look at the Director when I finally start to speak. "I'm a Huntress, daughter of a Hunter, and I come from a long line of Hunters. Don't worry about me. We Hunters know that we must destroy evil, and purge the infection no matter what the personal cost." Looking up into the sun, I smile at my father's approval of me. "Besides, Dad did ease me into it." Remembering the pride in Dad's voice as he said his last words, burned away the tears that teased at my eyes.

The Director coughed quietly. "I read your report. Yes, your father did help you, even at the end. But don't isolate yourself, like your father did. He tried to be a Hunter, and have a normal life. In the end, that is how he was destroyed. There is no such thing as a normal life for a Hunter." He spoke somberly. He turns to look me in the face. To look me in the eyes. But since that night, I won't look anyone in the eyes. I won't be vulnerable again.

Cheerfully, I counter, "Yes there is!" I smiled at the Director's confused face. "The normal life for a Hunter, is to hunt." I nod emphatically at my words. A little content. And a lot smug. I was hoping to redirect the Director's attention from my face by starting an argument. It works. Just as the Director holds up a finger to begin his reasoned and mature counter-attack to my silly school-girl notion, we hear Bro yelling for me.

"Sis! Sis! Check it out! They modified the dart guns we used!" Brother runs fast to catch up to me. He is holding out a dart gun that looked very familiar. "They liked the guns that Dad and I made, and now they want me to help design even more!" At the remembrance of Dad, his face dropped. "But Dad is the one that really designed them." His voice trailed away as sorrow threatened to overwhelm him.

I don't want him to drag himself down. So I try to bolster his ego. "And you are the one that modified them. So show them what Dad's son can do!" Knowing that he hates shows of affection, I hug him tightly in public. As I thought he would, he pushes me away, complaining of my mushiness and that I'll ruin his devil-may-care reputation. He then realizes what I was doing, and gives me a true hug in return. While he holds on to me, I spy a weakness in the dart gun's design. Hoping to give him something to obsess about for a while, I reach over and break his prototype. He looks at the pieces in shock. Thinking of how I broke it, I see the grin of inspiration and mischievous invention slowly embrace him. Not even excusing himself, he runs off, back to the buildings, where I'm sure that he will make a better prototype. Maybe even one that I can't break. Quickly.

I stand perfectly still for a moment, and sense the time. I don't wear a watch anymore. I've become so attuned to the rhythms of life, that I just *know*. "It will be sunset in a few hours."

The Director is startled by my statement. He doesn't jump or make any kind of physical reaction to what I've said. Rather, it is the lack of physical reaction that gives it away. "No. You're not going out tonight. As your legal guardian, I have to keep an eye on you and keep you from getting into dangerous situations." The Director gently scolded me.

"Then you should have prevented my conception and birth. I am a Huntress, daughter of a Hunter. I *am* a dangerous situation." I pull the Sword from its concealment. In the afternoon sun, it sparkled and shone as if lit from within. Before that night, the Sword had always appeared plain to me, devoid of adornment and absent of markings. But now, in day or in night, the runes and ancient markings reveal themselves to me in spectacular detail. I understand them, and am able to read them clearly. To see the Sword as my father saw it, made me feel as if he was still with me. I feel the enormity of time and the enormity of the task that was to come. But for the first time, I felt at peace.

The sunlight danced on the Sword, and life danced with me.

And that is how the dream ended. Really. This whole thing was a dream. A very detailed, involving dream. I *still* left out a lot of detail, like the type of the furniture that Brother ducked behind. (Oak with cotton covering.) How many panes were on the window that the vampires broke through in the den. (Eight) The clothes that Bro, Dad, and I were wearing. (We like cotton and denim.) LOTS of detail. I dreamed this whole thing, in one night. When I woke up the next morning, and saw sunlight outside of my window, I was actually relieved. It wasn't until I reached for the sword that I realized that the whole thing was a dream.

It's been several months since I had that dream. And I still remember it as sharply as I did the first morning after. I thought I'd write it down. And here it is.

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